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**THE PRESS AND THE ORGANISATION  
OF SOCIETY**

*[Revised Edition]*

# The Press and the Organisation of Society

BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

THIS little book was first published in 1922, and though some of the illustrations used may appear out of date, the general statement of the problem is as applicable to present-day conditions as it was when the book was written. The case as here stated is the "constant" of the problem of the Press as it exists in Great Britain and in America; is an attempt to state the case in its general social aspect; as one of the problems, that is to say, which any form of society must face and solve if it is to avoid progressive moral deterioration and to become increasingly capable of self-government and be generally worth while.

All that is assumed as to future development is that as men become more conscious of their social dangers, the greater will be the conscious collective effort to control social forces to the end of avoiding those dangers.

This assumption implies that we must deal with the Press otherwise than by the mere *laissez aller* of a commercial scramble for profits. That what is properly called "the Public Press" is a public concern, a social force which may become a social danger calling for conscious collective control, is at this date common ground. That this collective control should not take the form of returning to the governmental censorships of past generations is one of the subjects argued in the pages that follow.

No one who reads these pages with any impartiality or intelligence will interpret them as an "attack" either on the profession of journalism or on individual newspaper proprietors. (It happens that the present writer was for twenty years either a journalist or the business director of

## INTRODUCTION

newspapers.) The pages which follow are an attempt to show that journalists and proprietors alike are in the grip of certain forces which, despite personal desires to the contrary, make of the Press a stimulant of much that is anti-social and mischievous. The object of the concrete suggestions here made is to remedy that situation and to improve the position of the working journalist in this respect.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE REAL ISSUE

THE form and degree of ownership or control which in a socialised order of society the community should exercise over its streets, sewers, roads, bridges, railways, gas, electricity, mines, land or capital, are the commonplaces of the discussion of an improved social order. But the considerations which apply properly to that discussion do not apply for the most part to the problem of the Press in a dense and industrialised society. The community's main concern with the newspaper is not with its economic function in a direct sense, its importance as a form of property or as a producer of "wealth"—that is altogether secondary. The importance of this problem lies in the fact that the newspapers are practically the only means which the community has of informing itself of the facts which determine its collective decisions, social or political. The papers are the witnesses upon whose evidence, mainly, the daily judgments of civilised mankind to-day are based. To a society whose purview has come to embrace the whole world—a society which has so developed that the hasty decisions of busy and pre-occupied folk, reading "catch headlines" in underground trains, offices and tea shops, are laws of war and peace in Delhi, Dublin and Berlin—to such a society the Press is at times, and generally in times of crisis, its eyes and its ears, if not indeed its pulpit and its forum.

The problem of this form of property is differentiated from other forms by one aspect of its recent history. In the case of such things as roads, bridges, water, telegraphs, obvious social need has declared that they shall pass more and more into the possession of the community; the direction

has been from private towards public control. In the case of the Press, the dissemination of the printed word, social need has imposed the contrary tendency: from public control—the dictation of the State—towards private freedom.<sup>1</sup> Our grandfathers fought for the liberation of the Press from State control as an obvious part of the battle for freedom. It is one of the disillusionments of a purely political democracy that the “free Press”—the unfettered and abundant production of cheap newspapers to which our grandfathers looked as the means of popular freedom and enlightenment—has become one of the worst obstacles to the development of a capacity for real self-government, perhaps the worst of all the menaces to modern democracy. The institution which the older order most feared as the instrument of revolution has, in fact, become the main instrument by which any real movement towards a new social order is resisted.

The reader is reminded of this very recent phase in the history of the Press in order at once to come to grips with the real issue in this problem. “Nationalisation” as a principle, even when qualified by the self-government of Guild Socialism, cannot be applied to the Press as

<sup>1</sup> Although nothing in the nature of the Press Act of 1662 has operated since the beginning of the eighteenth century, vestiges of governmental control lasted until the abolition of the taxes on newspapers and advertisements in 1853 and of the paper duty in 1861. Earlier methods of restricting the power of the Press were the *Imprimatur*, the General Warrant, and the grants of monopolies. Under Cromwell the Press suffered more severely even than under the Star Chamber, but perhaps the climax was reached under the Restoration Government, when Roger L'Estrange, a professional exposer of “libels and heresies,” was appointed Surveyor of the Press. The official attitude of that time is well illustrated in one of his declarations:

“I do declare myself . . . that supposing the Press in order, the people in their right wits, and news or no news to be the question, a Public Mercury shall never have my vote, because I think it makes the multitude too familiar with the actions and counsels of their superiors, too pragmatical and censorious, and gives them not only an itch but a kind of colourable right and licence to be meddling with the Government.”

one might apply it to mines or railways. And it cannot be so applied for a reason that gets at once to the heart of the problem.

That reason is the nature of the human mind; its extreme fallibility, its indispensable need—if it is to preserve any adequate capacity for sound judgment—of hostile criticism and contradictory discussion; and the relation which the function of the Press bears to those things. If a people are to be in a position to judge the conduct of their Government, to decide whether it is doing well or ill, to decide the merits of public policy at all; if, indeed, they are to preserve the capacity for sound judgment, they must have the facts put before them not only as the Government would have them put, but also as those who disagree with the Government may desire to put them. In other words, the problem of the Press, its place in society, its control, is directly related to the very fundamental problem of freedom of discussion as the indispensable condition of truth; to the fact that all governments—and all peoples—need criticism; that without the correcting influence of unpopular opinions—that is to say, new and unusual opinions which governments and peoples alike always wish to suppress—popular opinion would steadily deteriorate in worth and the capacity for self-government decline.

Now it is true, as it is in part the object of these pages to show, that the present industrialised Press does not ensure the condition just named; it progressively undermines it. But the alternative of returning to the Governmental control of the Press in any of the forms which we had in the past would be to exchange a bad situation for a worse.

How very real is the danger of slipping into the creation of a new form of Inquisition, of allowing governments to

create by the public control of the Press a political and social Holy Office, is shown by the experience of the Press during the War and the results obtained by our Colleges of Propaganda for political purposes. The most spectacular form of this Inquisition was, of course, the operation of the Defence of the Realm Act in England, and of the Espionage Act in America. In Britain we came to the suppression of newspapers and the prosecution of men like Bertrand Russell, not for revealing information which could be of any possible use to the enemy, but for the expression of opinion "likely to discourage recruiting." The Sermon on the Mount would discourage recruiting, and a Parliamentary Under Secretary of State announced, logically enough, that if used for such a purpose that document would be liable to seizure. We had the foreign circulation of quite a number of papers—including that of the *Nation*—prohibited. Authors like Mr. G. Lowes Dickinson were put on a similar index. (The wonders of the military mind in these matters are quite incomprehensible.) We had house-to-house searches for incriminating documents. In short, there was nothing for which we had held up Imperialist Prussia and Czarist Russia to scorn during generations that could not be done under the law of Britain. And America, of course, was worse.<sup>1</sup> The story of these repressions has been told at length elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> Under the provisions of the amendment to the Espionage Act of 1918 a fine of ten thousand dollars or twenty years' imprisonment, or both, faced anyone who, while the United States was at war, should "wilfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous or abusive language about the form of government of the United States, or the Constitution . . . or the military and naval forces . . . or the flag of the United States . . . or any language intended to bring the form of government of the United States . . . or the flag . . . or the uniform . . . into contempt, scorn, contumely or disrepute . . . or suggest the doing of any of the acts or things . . . enumerated. . . ." One cannot follow the amazing account of war-time prosecutions and deportations and legislative expulsions without realising how precarious is the hold which the supposedly fundamental national ideal of freedom has

But, gross and often stupid as they were, one may doubt whether they represented the worst feature of the return to the governmental control of opinion. They were at least visible, and could be challenged, and the courts were obliged to execute the law publicly. The nation saw in some measure what it was doing and permitting. But the use of governmental propaganda, which became a feature of government in every belligerent State, is much less overt and much more dangerous. Governmental Press Bureaux and the utilisation of the Press as the chief instrument of governmental propaganda were common to every belligerent country. Those who cared to exercise a little vigilance could see in every other column of their newspaper the trail of propaganda. What the reader not "in the know" often took for unalloyed "news" was, as a matter of fact, often a partial statement concocted for military or political purposes in the "Information Department" of some interested Foreign (or Home) Government. In a few months—quite as much in Britain and America

secured in American courts and legislatures. If there had been any real feeling for freedom as a principle, Debs would not have been convicted for a speech generally opposing the war, and praising Rose Pastor Stokes who had been convicted of opposing the draft for a similar speech. (Her conviction was later reversed.) The "Masses" would not have been excluded from the mails because of cartoons opposing the war and calling Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman "friends of American freedom." Mere abusive and intemperate language would have gone unpunished, except by the more effectual censure of public opinion. The son of former Chief Justice Doe, of New Hampshire, would not have been convicted for writing, in a letter, that the President was wrong when he said Germany had promised to end the submarine warfare against neutrals, since the Sussex note contained no such promise. A film producer would not have been sentenced for ten years, and forced into bankruptcy, for exhibiting "The Spirit of '76," a depiction of scenes from the American revolution which the Judge thought tended to make Americans slack in their loyalty to an ally. Blodgett would not have been sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment for urging the defeat of a Congressman who voted for conscription, and for circulating an argument against the constitutionality of the Draft Act.

as in Germany—we managed to make of the Press a more “reptile” instrument than Bismarck could have hoped to create. Strong as that statement may sound, it suffices to read the post-war publications of journalists and war correspondents, to study the analyses of the news like that made by Mr. Walter Lippmann in his “Test of the News,”<sup>1</sup> to be compelled to admit its essential truth.

We shall miss the essential character of the evil if we assume that the fault is purely a governmental one. The worst censorship imposed during the War—imposed, indeed, in certain matters normally during peace-time—was not that imposed by the governments, but that imposed, first, by certain interests, and also, quite as dangerously, by the public itself. If practically the whole Press of Western Europe and America normally and systematically falsified the news from Russia (in the fashion in which Mr. Lippmann has shown to be the case with one of the greatest of American papers;) if it never told a really straight story; if the same sort of distortion goes on about strikes and the Labour Movement, that is certainly not due mainly to the exercise of governmental censorship. It is due in part to the influence of certain interests, a point of view which daily newspapers, as now produced, are bound to respect. But it is also due—perhaps to an even greater degree—to the readers themselves, to “public opinion.” It is true that that opinion is created largely by the Press, but it is created by the way in which the Press plays upon and exploits certain tendencies and instincts.

The real danger of any resort to the control of publication by the community is (and the fact will be insisted upon in more than one connection in these pages) that the natural man hates freedom of discussion, the freedom,

<sup>1</sup> A Supplement to *The New Republic* of 4th August, 1920.

that is, of others to utter opinions with which he does not agree, which disturb his convictions. Free discussion, the listening to opinions that seem to us wrong, mischievous, dangerous and immoral, is an extremely unpleasant and difficult social discipline, to which, however, we must submit if we are ever to maintain a general judgment capable of managing our complex society at all. And the danger of the principle of public control is that it gives an outlet for the instinct which exists in all of us to coerce and browbeat those who have the insufferable impudence to disagree with us. To-day it may be asserted by a patriotic majority against pro-Germans or Bolsheviks. But to-morrow the principle will be invoked by Socialists against the bourgeoisie, and the next day by one kind of Socialist against another—and always on the ground, of course, of State necessity. But the real reason of the action will be the age-long hatred of heresy, of opinions which do not happen to be ours.

It is true, as we have seen, that the present capitalist Press, for reasons which will be developed at greater length presently, does not in fact guarantee freedom of discussion: very much the contrary. But if, then, a privately-owned Press is no solution, and if a Socialist society must reject the State control of its Press, what is the remaining alternative?

It will be the object of these pages to offer some answers to that question.

But it will be necessary first to get some clear notion of what constitutes both the strength and the evil of the industrialised Press as we now know it; in what way it is an enemy of social betterment; the nature of the forces that will have to be met and dealt with if we are to do better in the future.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PRESS AND THE PUBLIC MIND

THE ultimate case against the Press as we know it in the twentieth century is this:—

In a civilisation increasingly complex and difficult to manage, demanding not only a rising level of intelligence but of character—the capacity to discipline certain instincts which, undisciplined, become anti-social and destructive—newspapers are compelled for the profits which are the condition of their existence, increasingly to appeal to the most easily aroused interests of readers; to pander to the instincts and emotions that can be most rapidly excited, to the “first” instead of the “second” thought, irrespective of the social outcome of the tendency or temper thus created. Since the most rapidly aroused emotion is often the most anti-social, and the first thought, as opposed to the second, a prejudice, this competitive process sets up a progressive debasement of the public mind and judgment; of that capacity to decide wisely and truly which is, in the last resort, the thing upon which the well-working of society must depend.

Other dangers of the modern Press are subsidiary to that outstanding one. The Press is often the servant of special political and financial interests, of organised capital, of advertisers. Those facts will be dealt with presently. But it can only serve those interests by influencing the public mind in a certain way and by means of a certain general method. If we are to deal with proposals for meeting the dangers of such a situation we must understand something of the mechanism of that method.

We must also take for granted something which it would be outside the possible limits of these pages to establish, namely, that any society does indeed depend upon the "prevailing public opinion," which includes public temper and temperament, so largely the subject of suggestibility. That proposition is generally accepted as a matter of course, almost a truism. But its meaning is rarely fully seized. Least of all does it seem to be seized by politicians, the raw material of whose trade is after all the public mind. During the last ten years we have seen statesmen probably quite sincere in their desire to avoid for their country and for civilisation generally the catastrophes which obviously menace them, encouraging ideas, or a point of view (because it happens to serve some momentary political purpose) which must make those catastrophes inevitable. We saw statesmen who really did seem to believe, for instance, that if a settlement was made at the end of the War along the old lines, involving new wars, it would mark the end of Western civilisation, and who yet deliberately fed the temper of "anti-Hunism" out of which nothing but the old type of settlement could possibly arise. Their attitude seemed to deny the proposition that the character of the settlement would be determined by popular temper. They seemed to believe that "diplomatic experts" could—or would—defy that temper.

The "influence" of the Press in this or that matter of policy is often denied. We can point to cases of elections, for instance, where "all the papers were on one side and all the votes on the other." But such an example does not really touch the question of the ultimate effect of a commercialised Press upon the public mind and character.

The history of the years 1916 to 1919 left us in no doubt as to the influence which a single newspaper proprietor can exercise in times of emotionalism, when the

mood of the public has become—or can be made by suggestion—one of intense impatience and lack of self-control. Whether we like it or not, the greatest power in England, in certain times of crisis at least, is outside constitutional control. A few newspaper proprietors—Northcliffes, Hultons, Beaverbrooks, Bottomleys—come nearer, at just those junctures which are crucial, really to governing England and “making it what it is” than Commons or Cabinet, Church or Trade Union. In attempting to trace the shift of power in recent years we point to the decay of the Commons, the growing power of the Executive, the tyranny of the Cabinet, the autocracy of Mr. Lloyd George. But we know what gave to Mr. Lloyd George his autocratic power at certain crises, and what, as an actual fact, was the force determining that this Cabinet should be destroyed and that one created.

The real measure of the influence of the Press is not to be determined by the extent to which a Northcliffe or a Bottomley can lynch this politician or exalt that. It is often urged, indeed, with some truth that the influence of the Trust Press is far more apparent than real; that its function is intelligently to anticipate what in any case will take place—the war with Germany, conscription or what not—advocate it, and then appropriate the credit for having brought it about; that as its influence depends on faithfully reflecting public opinion, it cannot lead it or control it; that like a barometer it registers the weather and has no part in determining it. That is one position. An opposed school is typified by those whose one suggestion for the maintenance or the making of peace, for a better settlement, for the feeding of the famine areas, or what not, is the “conversion of Northcliffe.” If Northcliffe would but will it, the aspirations of mankind throughout the ages would at last be realised.

Both those views miss important elements of the truth. As to the first—that the influence of, say, Lord Northcliffe does not really count for much—it is voiced most energetically perhaps by those whose beliefs in concrete political and public affairs have been most largely determined by just the forces they belittle. One used to hear many an English householder talk most contemptuously of “these Harmsworth fellows and their halfpenny sensations,” and become indignant at the notion that he could be influenced in his opinions thereby, and yet reveal on cross-examination that practically every piece of printed matter that came into his house (which anyone ever read) came from just that despised source. “But I don’t take my opinions from the papers; I never read their leading articles.” If one led him on to expressions of opinion concerning the Government of the day, its merits and demerits; his estimate of the persons that composed it; his ideas of the character of other nations; his notions of fiscal policy, of national education, of the country’s past and future foreign policy, and so on, one would discover that every single opinion he expressed responded accurately to just that distribution of emphasis in the news of our time which marks the Northcliffe Press. Given the facts as this house-holder conceived them, he could come to no other opinion; and those facts—one group of them stressed day after day, and another group, intrinsically as important, hidden away in corners—were presented as Lord Northcliffe had decreed that they should be presented. The present writer has tested more than one such householder as to his knowledge of some essential facts: did he know of such and such action by such and such foreign government; of such and such statement in Parliament; of the result of such and such official enquiry? He did not; it was not intended that he should. His estimate of such and

such public man was formed of headline summaries or of paragraph summaries of Parliamentary speeches made by hostile journalists; his vague impression that some other public man had a great future before him was due in reality to hearing his wife and daughters talk so much about him, and *that* was due to the frequency with which pictures of the said man's babies, held lovingly by their mother, appeared in the "Weekly Home Comforter," which combines the overt distribution of paper patterns with the very successfully concealed promotion of certain political causes.

Obviously what England thinks in certain crises is largely controlled by a very few men, not by virtue of the direct expression of any opinion of their own, but by controlling the distribution of emphasis in the telling of facts: so stressing one group of them and keeping another group in the background as to make a given conclusion inevitable. And this, it may be said, justifies those who maintain that Northcliffe does in fact control the mind and opinion of the nation, and that he can by that means direct its policies and destiny.<sup>1</sup>

Dangerous as that power undoubtedly in certain circumstances may be, it is not the most dangerous element in the conditions which confront us. For there are very

<sup>1</sup> It should not be forgotten that almost more important than the newspapers themselves as selectors of the news that is to reach the public are the great news-distributing agencies—Reuter, the Exchange Telegraph, the Central News in this country, the Associated Press, the United Press, Havas, etc., abroad. There are interlocking arrangements between the British and foreign agencies; Havas works with the Associated Press, the latter with Reuter, and so on. Where a newspaper would reach hundreds of thousands, these news agencies reach scores of millions. In certain matters of policy, as in the relations of the Western nations and Russia, the news sent out by these agencies becomes a determining factor.

The newspaper owners are themselves among the chief shareholders in these concerns, the Associated Press being a co-operative one, owned by the newspapers whom it serves. (See footnote, Chapter IV, p. 41.)

definite limits to it; and it is precisely in the nature of those limits that we shall find a hint of the greater danger.

Let us see first how the power of a newspaper corporation is limited in, say, the matter of peace and war. Assume, for the sake of illustration, that the growth of militarism in Germany during the last ten or fifteen years would have been checked, and Liberal and internationalist tendencies developed, if England, in a radical attempt to get at the bottom of recurrent international rivalries, had devised an acceptable plan by which Germany had been guaranteed real equality of economic opportunity in the undeveloped areas of the world—in Egypt, Morocco and the rest of Africa—and a real economic “right of way” to the Near East. Suppose this plan to have been so far-reaching that it would be patent to the German people as a whole that they were in no way “encircled” or menaced in their economic interest, or excluded from opportunities equal to those of other great peoples; that England had been prepared to internationalise her own Imperially-governed territory, and to use her influence with France to secure the application of a similar policy in hers.

Now, if the head of a great newspaper combination, whose position must be distinguished from that of the editor of a “high brow” review or a weighty “organ of opinion,” had believed that, along some such lines as these, peace and the gradual liberalisation of German policy would have been secured, could he have used his power for the promotion of that policy? Let us imagine him doing it. To ask of the English people some surrender of sovereignty in their Imperially-governed territories—which would have been necessary to make such a policy successful—would have run counter to firmly-established notions of national right and dignity; it would have made many people uncomfortable and uneasy, and the whole idea would have

been very easily capable of misrepresentation. The "first thought" and "natural impulse" of a proud and Imperially-minded people would have been all against it, a fact which would certainly not have been lost upon the trade rivals of this suppositious newspaper proprietor. Those rivals, if they had been at all technically efficient, would have been able to secure a popular reaction by appeals to impulse, prejudice and passion, long before any large response could have been provoked by appeals to "second thoughts," rationally justified policies. These rivals would moreover have found capital support and advertising from the special groups menaced by the new policy. Had Lord Northcliffe adopted such a line fifteen years ago, he would not be Lord Northcliffe. Had his been the sort of mind to be attracted to such a policy it would not be the sort that is predominantly popular—"the common mind to an uncommon degree." If, when he first entered journalism, some years before the Boer War, he had left to others the task of giving expression to all those widespread impulses and feelings that lie near the surface of our nature, and had exploited rather the much more slowly aroused sentiment of rationalism, some other proprietor would have entered the neglected field, and the control of big circulations—and in certain crises national destinies—would now be in other hands.

Or take the case of the Election of December, 1918. Britain—Europe—was confronted by the most far-reaching international settlement in history, the greatest decision which Western Society in its corporate capacity had ever perhaps been called upon to make. If it was to show less futility and mischief than past international "settlements," the public mind had to get away from certain conceptions which had dominated those older settlements. To enter the Peace Conference with the idea that it was just a meeting

of judges to apportion due punishment to certain criminal States; that the War had no cause other than the special wickedness of those criminals; that they were of an unchanging wickedness which no new order in Europe could modify or affect, was obviously to make any such policy as that outlined by President Wilson, for instance, quite impossible. Yet because hatred, based on the idea of a nation as a single criminal person, was convenient to exploit, it was exploited without stint, even in America. President Wilson himself did not seem to realise that the intellectual lynching of Liberalism which his Government permitted and encouraged was bound to deprive him of the force necessary to carry his policy into effect—that force being the support of American feeling when it came to the peace. It was because that feeling turned against him that his task became too difficult.

The position in which Governments may find themselves, by letting loose or encouraging forces whose nature they seem not to realise, has been illustrated during the past year by the monstrous comedy of the Indemnity demands.<sup>1</sup> Those demands—perhaps also the Treaty as

<sup>1</sup> "The Paris proposals cannot, then, be meant seriously, any more than the original treaty was. They are simply another move in a game by which the players, at any rate, are no longer taken in. Mr. Lloyd George feels that he is making progress (perhaps he is) when he succeeds in persuading M. Briand to agree with him that 2 plus 2 does not make 12 but only 8; M. Briand hopes that, being eloquent, he may after all be able in the French Chamber to make a good enough song about 8 to defeat any argument from M. Poincaré as to how much better it would be for France if 2 plus 2 made 12. I doubt if there has ever been anything in history quite like it. Perhaps it is best diagnosed as a consequence of the portentous development of what we have learned to call propaganda. The monster has escaped from the control of its authours, and the extraordinary situation is produced in which the most powerful and the most intelligent statesmen in the world are compelled by unescapable forces to meet together day after day to discuss detailed variations of the impossible. . . . The thought of the two Prime Ministers in Paris muddling over silly formulas, with M. Loucheur buzzing about between them—formulas which they all know to be silly—is for anyone who realises what it is like, a thought of gibbering nightmare." (Mr. Maynard Keynes in the *Manchester Guardian*, 31st January, 1921.)

a whole—the politicians who made them knew to be utterly fantastic. They were made for “electoral reasons.” But the making of them merely adds to the momentum of the forces that the statesmen find themselves compelled to obey. They feed the monster before whom statesmen themselves become increasingly powerless.

Where Lord Northcliffe or another may seem for a time to maintain a policy which runs counter to the popular clamour of the moment—as when the *Daily Mail* was burned in the Stock Exchange because of its persistent attacks on Lord Kitchener—it merely means that he—Lord Northcliffe—knows what the public wants better than the public knows. He knew that their desire for victory was sufficiently near the surface, sufficiently formulated and overwhelming, for them to digest anything which he could show to be necessary for that purpose. And his rivals, in disparaging the line he took, showed themselves (since they too supported the war “to the bitter end”) his inferiors both in patriotism and in the real understanding of the popular mind.

In the matter of the shell shortage particularly, as in most of the other campaigns which he has conducted, the abuse which has in the past been levelled at Lord Northcliffe by less successful “patriots” has been inept enough. It is of the essence of his success that his social and political ideals should be the common and accepted ones of his time. Until the war the Northcliffe Press had no particular politics, and was perhaps on the whole the most impartial in England. It admitted, in the form of signed articles, an expression of views hostile to its own, to a degree that the papers who were so ready to gird at it could not boast of. If, during the War, it so selected daily facts as to tell in favour of the country’s cause and against the enemy’s; to maintain, by “corpse factory” and other fables, the hate

and anger necessary to the country's fighting temper; to discredit views which might abate that temper, and persons who did not share it, Lord Northcliffe had ample justification in the example of the country's Government and the accepted standards of patriotism. The real problem of the "stunt Press" consists not in the mischievous ingenuity of this or that journalistic pander, but in certain social, psychological and industrial conditions. If, in England, it had not been Bottomley or Northcliffe, it would have been someone else, whose personality would have swayed, within the range of limits just indicated, the collective action of his time. This does not mean that these men are without influence. They have power which may make all the difference between, say, peace and war. Where, as between two policies, the instinctive motives of conduct are pretty evenly balanced, the power of an individual in Lord Northcliffe's position is of course decisive. But in those situations a small power may be decisive. The fact which ought to disquiet us is the nature of the limits of individual power. These limits reveal—as in the instance just chosen—the operation of a psychological Gresham Law; just as in commerce debased coin, if there be enough of it, must drive out the sterling, so in the contest of motives, action which responds to the more primitive feelings and impulses, to first thoughts and established prejudices, can be stimulated by the modern newspaper far more easily than that prompted by rationalised second thought. Any newspaper appealing to the former group of motives must "get away with it" long before one which appeals to the second can establish its case.

It is true that the newspaper exploitation of mass psychology at times finds itself checked by the conditions of that psychology. The tussle between Mr. Lloyd George and Lord Northcliffe, for instance, revealed certain very

curious facts touching the limitations of newspaper power. During the war the public displayed a state of mind which made it peculiarly susceptible to suggestion; a credulity which recalled the witch-hunting manias of the Middle Ages. For a man to possess a German name rendered any accusation against him, however monstrous and fantastic, credible to the public. When a momentarily popular Member of Parliament declared that the German Emperor possessed a blackbook containing the names of forty thousand prominent Englishmen addicted to sexual perversion, and that the Kaiser's knowledge of their practices was used as blackmail to compel them to become his agents, the statement was quite seriously received. The Press treated it with the utmost solemnity. In this condition of sensationalism and unstable emotionalism it is possible for popular papers to drive Ministers out of office by organising some fantastic sensation, or by merely repeating some phrase (as when Lord Haldane was driven out of office by the repetition of the phrase "Germany, my spiritual home"). Argument and reason are powerless against these mere suggestions of the sensational Press, when the public is in that mood. But the law that the effect of a stimulus upon an organism becomes less with repetition applies in these matters. At the close of the War the public was "fed up" with sensations; it no longer responded to certain stimuli; it wanted to amuse itself; it did not want to take politics seriously. It was then that Mr. George realised that the Northcliffe Press had in large part lost its power over him. He told Lord Northcliffe, in effect, to go to blazes.<sup>1</sup> And nothing happened to the blasphemer. The heavens did not fall and Mr. George remained in office. Lord Northcliffe found—or already knew—that in the then prevailing state of

<sup>1</sup> In his "Grasshopper" speech in the House of Commons.

emotional and sensational fatigue the public would simply not respond to any "ramp" against the Prime Minister. An event like a General Election might once more place the preponderant power in the hands of the newspaper. But at a time when, in the process of reactions, politics had fallen into the background, Mr. George, with an acquiescent House of Commons, could defy Carmelite House. This latter institution was for the time being powerless against him.<sup>1</sup>

But these periods of emotional fatigue are interludes only. Almost invariably in times of crisis—when, that is, the gravest decisions are taken—the power over the minds of the public held by the Press is that which has already been sketched: we get the operation of that Gresham Law under which the more reflective and ratiocinated type of opinion must be driven out by the more emotional. Modern conditions of industry and finance tend to increase this premium upon the more impulsive and dangerous type of policy. It is important to realise in what manner modern industrial and financial conditions operate in this respect.

When Swift wrote certain of his pamphlets, he presented a point of view contrary to the accepted one, and profoundly affected his country's opinion and policy. Yet at

<sup>1</sup> It is part of the same mood of indifference to politics which makes it possible for the Northcliffe Press in one particular (and for quite fortuitous personal reasons) to run counter to such popular feeling as does exist. I refer to the support given by that Press to French policy. So far as it is possible to generalise in these matters, popular opinion is certainly hostile to French policy just now. But the *Daily Mail's* support of France does not affect its circulation. It would, however, if after a period of emotional rest on political questions, the music halls in London were to follow the example of the cabarets in Paris and direct their jingoism against the neighbour across the Channel. The Northcliffe Press would then have to achieve the *tour de force* managed by the Hearst Press in America during the war. Mr. Hearst, who has always been ferociously anti-British and anti-Japanese, and was actually publishing a paper in German just before the war, managed to be more jingo than his contemporaries as soon as public feeling reached the point where his circulation demanded it.

most he circulated a few thousand copies. One of the most important was printed at his own expense. Any printer in a back street could have furnished all the material capital necessary for reaching effectively the whole reading public of the nation. To-day, for an unfamiliar opinion to gain headway against accepted opinion, the mere mechanical equipment of propaganda would be beyond the resources of any ordinary individual. A newspaper—the only effective medium for pamphleteering in our day—is an important industrial undertaking demanding grave financial risks which the ordinary capitalist will not face unless he is pretty sure of popular support. No newspaper can be financially successful against well-established rivals if it champions unpopular opinions. We are thus in a vicious circle far more difficult to break than people unfamiliar with the conditions of newspaper production in a country like England can realise.

This circle means in practice the stereotyping of all those social and political conceptions which involve easily aroused passion and feeling—those that are rooted not necessarily in the deepest instincts, but in the most easily awakened ones. The net result of the process I have sketched is a temperamental and moral conservatism—a reversion to primitive instinct and the sloughing of the more lately acquired social qualities. That may seem a strange statement when we remember that England, for the purposes of the War, made overnight changes in the direction, for instance, of State Socialism which half a century of agitation in peace time could not have produced; and that as the heritage of war we have the phenomenon of Communism. But the temperamental and moral foundations of those policies are not new; they are as old as the tribal grouping of mankind. The instinct to the assertion of power and coercion, the submergence of the individual

in the group, the intense partisanship that will tolerate no individualism of thought or ideal, the determination to secure the victory of our group over rival groups, are not only among the instinctive foundations of the ancient tribe, of feudalism, of present policy in France, Poland and elsewhere, but are behind the more disruptive forces in Communism itself. And it is not a mere political accident that policy in so much of Europe tends to swing between the extreme Right and the extreme Left. The two are temperamentally allied.

The result of applying the tribal conception to the modern world is shown by the present condition of Europe. It needs revision. But every attempt at revision encounters somewhere the primitive tribal instinct or passion. All revision of conceptions in the past has been the work of small minorities, of individual minds, of a few heretics, encyclopædists or pamphleteers, able to reach other minds: for a sufficient length of time to break down the first prejudice. But the modern Press, by virtue of the psychological Gresham Law acting in the particular economic and industrial conditions of our time, tends to destroy that influence of the individual mind maintaining a heresy. If the feudalisms, autocracies, dynasties and inquisitions had possessed the modern mechanical Press, operating on closely packed populations whose industrial occupations demanded most of their mental energy, that control of the mind by which alone the old tyrannies were made possible might well have been maintained for all time. (A tiny governing minority did not impose its will upon the vast majority by virtue of superior physical force.) The modern Press is likely to make our conceptions of the State, Nationalism, individual right, international obligation, and institutions that depend thereon, all but impossible of reform.

We get this: given the conditions of competition in the industry of producing newspapers, it is both safer and more profitable to encourage the public in the falsehood with which it is familiar than to tell it the necessary but unpleasant truth that it does not like to hear. The things which it is most important for the public, in their own interests, to know, are precisely those things which it does not pay a paper to print. If, for instance, we have in Ulster a public opinion which is dangerous and destructive of social peace because it has unbalanced and lop-sided views about Catholics, the truths that it would be most in the public interest to tell are the truths that would help a Protestant to be tolerant towards Catholics. And a paper which, in Protestant Ulster, should give emphasis to that kind of truth would, of course, go under as against a rival paper telling of the wickedness of Catholics. So during the War, and in the period that has followed the War: the unity and restoration of Europe, the post-war reconstruction, demanded a public opinion which should shed the one-sidedness of the war temper. Consider for a moment the rôle played in the politics of Europe by the temper of France since the Armistice. To put it at its lowest, if France ran in any danger of making mistakes that danger would not be likely to come from any excessive feeling of tenderness towards the Germans. If she ran the risk of adding to the difficulties of European reconstruction, those difficulties would be more likely to come from an excess of anti-German feeling. They have come from that feeling. Yet the public service which so needed doing for the French mind is precisely the service which it was commercially fatal for any French newspaper to perform. The truths that France most needed to know or to be reminded of were those of which it would be fatal, from the point of view of profit, for her newspapers to

remind her. It was most profitable to increase that national danger which was already her greatest national danger. One could multiply these examples indefinitely.

The world needed, for instance, to be told the truth at the time of the Peace Conference. The Governments themselves needed that the public should be told the facts, in order that it should not oppose policies which the Governments knew to be necessary, but the wisdom of which was not always apparent on the surface. But the public did not want to be informed, did not want the truth. There were the German atrocities, for instance; although all of them may have "happened," they were, as selected by the Press, less than half the truth. To get the whole truth—to achieve the state of mind necessary for making a real peace at Paris—it would have been necessary to tell with equal emphasis of the humane actions of the enemy, and of the atrocities committed even by the Allies; and to remind ourselves that if Americans were not to be "outlawed from civilisation" for the weekly burning of negroes, or the British for Irish reprisals and Indian repression, the Germans could not be outlawed for conduct no more atrocious.

We get finally a condition in which, presumably, it is impossible to tell the truth about the simplest and most trivial incident, if popular passion happens to be involved. Mr. Sisley Huddleston recounts a typical case of which he had direct personal knowledge. During an international conference in Belgium a scene was enacted in a café one evening: a German journalist, who happened to be attending peaceably to his own business, was insulted and assaulted without provocation by a drunken Belgian officer. The thing of itself has no political, international or social importance. It certainly involves no reflection upon Belgium. Every army in the world contains officers who

would be guilty occasionally of that kind of thing; and the fact that the German journalist remained quiet has no bearing one way or the other on the question of Germany's responsibility for the War. The thing is either not worth reporting at all or worth reporting truthfully. But this silly and simple incident became embroidered with lurid details of the German flinging insults, singing "Deutschland über Alles," waving his national flag, while the Belgian officer was described as tactfully intervening to save the German from an exasperated crowd. "When I read such grotesque distortions of incidents which I have seen with my own eyes," writes Mr. Huddleston, "and which do not appear to call, in anybody's interest, for the smallest embroidery, I wonder how it is possible to believe any newspaper story."<sup>1</sup> The point is this: if so simple, so trivial, so unmistakable a thing cannot be reported truthfully, what reliance can be placed upon the reporting of complex or difficult facts, where even scrupulous attention to evidence would not suffice to prevent serious divergencies of testimony? Papers in the case here cited must have been guilty of false testimony which would cause an ordinary police court witness to be indicted for perjury. One understands how the "nationalised women" and the "corpse factories" become possible. Such a method creates the spirit which had made peace impossible in Europe.

That spirit is fed by the poison of limitless small daily lies. A very famous war correspondent, attached to one of the greatest London morning papers, referred casually in the hearing of the present writer to the following experience:—An Australian company had captured a German gun after an extraordinarily stiff fight. The German gunner was still living. Moved by his gallantry,

<sup>1</sup> *The Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1920.

the Australians pinned a note on his uniform to this effect: "Do not take this man's Iron Cross away; he put up a good fight"; and managed to leave him at a spot where the enemy stretcher-bearers would find him. Even an incidental testimony to enemy courage, necessary to recounting the act of chivalry on the part of our own troops, was too much for the great paper, and the correspondent received instructions in these terms: "Do not send us any more stories about the dear good Germans; the only good German is a dead German." Another incident illustrates how the civilian's standard of belligerency differs for the worse from that of the soldiers. During the discussion as to whether the Germans killed in the Zeppelin brought to earth should receive a religious burial, some airmen officers wrote to this same paper, protesting against the idea that the German dead were not entitled to decent burial, and pointing out that in similar circumstances our men received it at the enemy's hands. The editor replied that the communication of these officers could not be published, as it was contrary to the policy of the paper. Incidents by the score—by the thousand, indeed—could be quoted as showing how the artificial newspaper standard eliminates the human decencies which might save war-time temper from its worst, and, as the costly catastrophes of the Treaty show, its most disastrous manifestations.

Of course, the proprietors knew their business. A paper that had told day by day of good things done by Germans and bad things done by ourselves, as well as the evils of the enemy and the good deeds of ourselves, would simply have been ruined by the competition of rival papers that confined themselves to half the truth.<sup>1</sup> To ask aught

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson has said: "In war-time a people only want to hear two things—good of themselves and evil of the enemy. And I know not what is the more to be feared after a war, streets full of soldiers who have learned to rob, or garrets full of scribblers who have learned to lie."

else, it may be said, is to ask the impossible of human nature.

What the Press does here is so to alter the proportion of the ingredients of sound opinion as to make one element, which might in a healthier state be counteracted by another, dominate the whole. It may be indispensable, perhaps healthy, that we should stretch the facts a little for "our side," give our people the benefit of the doubt. And in most primitive communities there may have been no particular danger in this. But certain forces with which we are dealing make that tendency in the case of the modern Press extremely dangerous.

The influence of the mind and character which is not that of the herd stands out. In the communities of antiquity, Athens might obey its Socrates, but only after it had been influenced by him in some degree. The Athenians had heard his voice—a very large proportion of them his actual physical voice. He met Anytus on more or less equal ground: an appreciable element of the population heard the debate and repeated it. Mr. Bertrand Russell and Mr. Bottomley meet on no such equality to-day. Mr. Bottomley's voice during the War was heard to the extent of many millions weekly, in papers circulating literally by the million, on hoardings, in Parliament. He was one of the great national forces forming the national character, determining the national policy. Of Mr. Bertrand Russell the millions—"England"—heard not at all. They only heard of him as a "pestiferous pacifist" (as Mr. Bottomley would say), who was very rightly sent to jail and placed under those regulations of Dora designed to control movements of spies and enemy aliens.

Assume if you will that John Bull—England—is not at bottom all Bottomley, but that there is also hidden in his

nature a potential Bertrand Russell, a Lowes Dickinson, a John Hobson, really loving truth, desiring to see England not merely "top dog" but also right and generous. Assume that both elements are necessary to the healthy sensual man, the one correcting the other. What chance, in the circumstances of an industrialised competitive Press, has the second against the first, represented by Mr. Bottomley? Let us face the truth. The conditions of the modern Press cause the Bottomleys more and more and the Russells and Dicksons less and less to form the national character.

The forces under review are not merely concerned with the mechanical control of ideas. They transform the national temperament. The constant stimulus to passion and the herd instinct, entailed by the necessity of finding an appeal that shall be wider and more successful than that of a rival newspaper concern, the consequent violence of the public mind, the impossibility of an unpopular view obtaining adequate expression, all end by destroying the capacity to weigh a contrary opinion, by which alone thought on public issues is possible. The process by which the Governmental changes of the first three years of the War were brought about can only be described as moral lynchings. In 1914, the public man who criticised Mr. Asquith or Sir Edward Grey could count upon being driven from public life; two years later, those who supported them were so driven. The patriot of January became the "pro-German" of June. Diametrically opposed opinions were advocated with the same violence, and the short-memoried public, impulsive, irreflective, followed the hue and cry in both cases. The conditions which produced a political Englishman who was impervious to public clamour, stubborn in the maintenance of his individual opinion, tolerant of opposed views, have

disappeared. Everyone now seems to go in terror of the "lynch Press."

At the present moment in England an observer finds this extraordinary situation: on almost every hand, opinions are expressed privately that find no public expression whatever. Thus "public opinion" does not express real opinion. Yet if all were to speak their private minds, this public opinion of which they complain would be a vastly different thing. The failure to make this needed moral contribution to the collective mind causes that mind to be shaped by its worst elements. Those who shirk this civic duty cannot complain if they, too, are finally the victims of the lynch temper which they have done nothing to check.

It is true that in the terms of the problem as just stated, the expression of momentarily unpopular opinion would be made at great disadvantage; but the balance would turn in favour of sanity if all did their civic duty in this respect. "The ultimate foundation of every State," says Seeley, "is a way of thinking." And though certain suggestions towards facilitating the problem mechanically will be made presently, it is certain that any solution must include this moral contribution of each man's "unpopular" opinion. If that is shirked the "way of thinking" upon which in the last resort we must depend will be a disastrous way.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PRESS AND THE OLD ORDER

THE condition of the successful working of democracy is that the people who make its decisions shall make them in full knowledge of the facts of the case which they are deciding. Otherwise democracy itself becomes a trap for the people it is supposed to save. Those who triumphantly point to the result of some khaki election, in which the simplest facts are hidden in a smoke-screen of passion and the simplest truth silenced in a din of trivialities and confusions, as the voice of the people, and so of God, have not learned the A, B, C of democracy.

I have quoted earlier Seeley's words, that "the foundation of every State is a way of thinking." Prussia managed to persuade some millions of young men to think that it was their duty to give their lives for Prussianism—for "the Fatherland." (You cannot very readily bribe a man to surrender his life—unless, as someone has said, you can make him very certain of his mansion in the skies; you must persuade him that it is his duty.) That miracle was performed by getting at the mind of the nation, by controlling the information which reached it, through education in youth and through the Press later on. It was not physical force which enabled the autocracy of Prussia—a few hundred elderly persons—to impose a system which asked such vast sacrifices of the common man. A little tiny clique could not compel by physical force the submission of millions. This triumph of a tiny minority through the capture of the mind of the mass, through the control of the suggestions which dominate it, is one of the

commonplaces of history: it explains why, again and again, an enslaved people have been brought to fight for the perpetuation of their slavery, physical, military, economic, ecclesiastical or social, and to hate those who would liberate them.

In this capture of the mind by our industrial autocracy as the means to economic and social subjugation, the most powerful instrument of all is the modern industrialised Press. Through it our economic Prussianism can control the nation's mind, form its opinions, direct its passions, determine its judgments.

Now the case for the abolition of this arrangement, the case against the economic autocracy, is not likely to be made by the old order itself. Power and authority, domination over others, are the things for which above all else men will sell their souls. It is to ask moral miracles of men to expect that in the generation of reconstruction that faces us, day after day, year in year out, the facts which tell in favour of reconstruction along the lines of industrial democracy should be given impartially by the beneficiaries of industrial autocracy.

But even if we could imagine the great captains who direct the newspaper industry conceiving a passionate desire to abolish the order or system of society which has given them wealth, distinction, influence, titles, power over government as well as over peoples, that system itself by its very mechanism would baulk their reformist intention. They themselves are within its grip.

A part of the mechanism of that grip has been described in the preceding chapter. But certain facts should be added.

That third of the population which belongs to the servant-keeping class, or hovers on its fringe, still supplies a much larger proportion of newspaper readers than do the

remaining two-thirds. Any really big circulation must in the present condition of things be found in large proportion among it. Labour politics would certainly alienate it. And that would mean alienating not only a proportionate amount of advertising, but an amount disproportionate to the loss of circulation—if, indeed, a paper consistently advocating higher wages and better labour conditions did not have to face something like a boycott of advertisers, as Labour papers to-day have, in some measure, to face it.

A newspaper is a great industrial enterprise, demanding a capital of anything from a hundred thousand to a million pounds sterling, easily ruined by the competition of rivals catching more quickly and more successfully the popular taste. Capital of such dimensions is usually obtained from the public in the shape of share subscriptions, whose owners regard their investment as a mere dividend-earning operation. What, in these circumstances, would be the position of the ordinary capitalist newspaper proprietor who took a line which the momentary prejudice of the public would enable rivals to hold up to condemnation with the cry of “Bolshevism”? Assuming him to be sincere, his shareholders would soon present the view that he was not entitled to jeopardise their property for the advocacy of his opinions. His obligation to his convictions would be in conflict with his implied obligation to earn dividends for his shareholders. And even if he were to disregard them, there would arise the fact that if he lost his circulation his organ would be valueless even to the cause for which he sacrificed it.

It is, indeed, frequently assumed that the reasons which make the existing Press so consistent a supporter of the existing order are of a different nature—that the “interests,” “big business,” dominate newspapers by proprietorial influence; that they stand in together to control

the Press directly, by virtue of such interest. This would make of the Press an instrument of the capitalist interests, rather than one great capitalist interest among others.

Now advertisers, as shown in the next chapter, can as a body exercise immense influence on papers. Even that influence, however, can be exaggerated. Really big circulations can afford to be comparatively independent of the advertiser, in the sense that they need not modify policy in order to keep advertisements. And in any case, outside the advertisers the relationship of "big business" to the Press is not that of master to servant. The view that the Press is the tool of other interests is a common one, but the facts as a whole do not (in England at least) support it. For one thing, the real ownership of the "great" Press in England is fairly well known. The Press is itself a great capitalist enterprise, and is very rarely used as a mere instrument subsidiary to other interests. The Press may unconsciously "stand in" with these other capitalist concerns on terms of equality, but being itself a capitalist venture of dimensions as great as those of iron or shipping enterprises, it is not their servant in the sense very often implied.

The real relation of the Press to capitalism is, in fact, graver than this. There are cases here and there—there was a notorious one recently in the case of a coal owner—in which certain interests obtain control of papers for the purpose of promoting those interests. The method is ever common in Germany and France. It is not common in England, and we shall misconceive the real problem of the capitalist Press, and misread the processes by which it becomes a social danger, if we assume that to be the gravamen of the charge against it.

Even Mr. Upton Sinclair, who seems to take the view that the Press is merely the tool of other interests, reveals

facts which show it to be rather an independent capitalist venture. "Journalism," he says, "is one of the devices whereby industrial autocracy keeps its control over political democracy; it is the day by day, between elections propaganda, whereby the minds of the people are kept in a state of acquiescence, so that when the crisis of an election comes, they go to the polls and cast their ballots for either one of the two candidates of their exploiters. Not hyperbolically and contemptuously, but literally and with scientific precision, we define journalism in America as the business and practice of presenting the news of the day in the interest of economic privilege. . . . The methods by which the 'Empire of business' maintains its control over journalism are four: first, ownership of the papers; second, ownership of the owners; third, advertising subsidies; and fourth, direct bribery. By these methods there exists in America a control of news and of current comment more absolute than any monopoly in any other industry."

Yet he continues as follows:—

"A modern newspaper is an enormously expensive institution. The day is past when a country printer could set up a hand-press and print news about the wedding of the village blacksmith's daughter and the lawn party of the Christian Endeavour Society, and so make his way as a journalist. Nowadays people want the last hour's news from the battlefield or the council-hall. If they do not get it in the local paper, they get it in the 'extras' from the big cities, which are thrown off fast express-trains. The franchise which entitles a paper to this news from all over the world is very costly; in most cities and towns it is an iron-clad monopoly. You cannot afford to pay for this service, and to print this news, unless you have a large circulation, and

for that you need complicated and costly presses, a big building, a highly-trained staff. Incidentally you will find yourself running an advertising agency and a public employment service; you will find yourself giving picnics for news-boys, investigating conditions in the county-hospital, raising subscription funds for a monument to Our Heroes in France. In other words, you will be an enormous and complex institution, fighting day and night for the attention of the public, pitting your composite brain against other composite brains in the struggle to draw in the pennies of the populace.

"Incidentally, of course, you are an institution running under the capitalist system. You are employing hundreds, perhaps thousands of men, women and children. You are paying them under the iron law of wages, working them under the rule of 'the devil take the hindmost.' You have foremen and managers and directors, precisely as if you were a steel-mill or a coal-mine; also you have policemen and detectives, judges and courts and jailors, soldiers with machine-guns and sailors with battleships to protect you and your interest—precisely as does the rest of the predatory system of which you are a part. And of course you have the capitalist psychology; you have it complete and vivid—you being the liveliest part of that system."<sup>1</sup>

It is probably true that the direct use or control of papers by certain interests is commoner in America than in England. The reason is largely geographical. The distances are so great in the United States that there are not one or two dominating newspaper capitals, as in this country. In England, cities like Manchester and Birmingham suffer the most severe competition from the London Press.

<sup>1</sup> *The Brass Check*, p. 233.

Chicago and San Francisco suffer practically none from the New York Press. Each considerable American city tends to have its own paper, necessarily relatively small. There is no daily paper in America with the circulation of the *Daily Mail*. It thus happens that the newspaper enterprises in England, regarded simply as industrial concerns, come nearer to standing on a basis of financial equality with the other great industries of the country. Indeed, the newspaper enterprises are among the greatest. Their interests are not always at once with others. (There has just been something of a tussle between newsprint manufacturers who want protection and the users of newsprint, the papers, who do not. There was not much doubt as to which side would win.)

Even in America, as Mr. Upton Sinclair is careful to point out, there does not exist "one thoroughly organised and completely conscious business government." What we have is a number of groups, struggling for power; and sometimes these groups fall out with one another, and make war upon one another, and then we see a modern application of the ancient adage, "When thieves fall out, honest men come into their own."

"If, for example, you had studied the Press of New York City at the time of the life insurance exposures, you would certainly have concluded that this Press was serving the public interest. As it happens, I followed that drama of life insurance with the one man in America who had most to do with it, the late James B. Dill. Judge Dill ran a publicity bureau in New York for several months, and handed out the greater part of this scandal to the newspaper reporters. He told me precisely how he was doing it, and I knew that this whole affair, which shook the nation to its depths, was simply the Morgan and Ryan interests taking away the control

of life insurance money from irresponsible people like 'Jimmy' Hyde, and bringing it under the control of people who were responsible—that is, responsible to Morgan and Ryan. The whole campaign was conducted for that purpose, and when that purpose was accomplished, the legislative investigations and the newspaper clamour stopped almost over-night."

One could, of course, point to certain similar cases in England, but not to the same degree. The major danger with us does not lie in that sort of scandal. It may well at bottom be as grave, or graver, but it is not mainly of that kind.

Sinclair relates a personal experience of his own which brings us nearer to the fundamental trouble:—

"That was in 1897 or 1898. I was a boy out of college, and fell victim to this modern kind of 'war-making.' I was walking on the street, and heard newsboys shouting an extra, and saw these words, printed across the front page of the *New York Evening Journal*:—

WAR

DECLARED!

So I parted with one of my hard-earned pennies, and read:—

WAR  
may be  
DECLARED  
soon.

"But did that bit of knavery keep me from buying the Hearst newspapers forever after? It did not. I am an American, and can no more resist sensational headlines printed in a newspaper than a donkey can

resist a field of fat clover. So I still take a Hearst newspaper, the *Los Angeles Examiner*, and watch Mr. Hearst prepare my mind for the bloody process of annexing millions of Hearst acres to my country. Both the Hearst paper and the Otis paper print elaborate accounts of how the government is preparing to invade Mexico. There are details of diplomatic negotiations and of military preparations, stories elaborate, complete, and apparently entirely authentic. Once in a while the State Department issues a formal denial that it has any such intentions, or is making any such preparations; the *Times* and *Examiner* print these denials—and then go on blandly printing their stories! I am left to wonder which is lying, the American Government or the American Press."

If Mr. Hearst wants war with Mexico because he owns Mexican land, are we to assume that the Harmsworths rampaged for the Transvaal because they owned South African mines, or for the German war because they owned Alsatian property? There is a much simpler explanation. The gold mine of Lord Northcliffe was nearer home. It was in the expanded circulation of the *Daily Mail* and *Evening News*, which the sensationalism of the Boer War facilitated. It is a certain public temper and its exploitation which has furnished to certain newspaper proprietors far greater wealth and power than they could secure by the advancement of such ulterior objects as manipulating the Stock Exchange or serving the interests of some other industrial group. Any working editor or manager of a large daily paper will confirm this: his daily preoccupation is with one thing—the mind of his reader. All else is subsidiary to the problem of selling his paper, obtaining circulation. As a matter of simple work-a-day fact, that is the real pre-occupation of editors, and very rarely the

question as to whether its policy is pleasing this or that interest.

If there is insistence upon this distinction, it is because unless we take it fully into account we may overlook the most potent of the forces with which we have to deal. The fact that the Press is itself a great capitalist interest, not the mere tool of other interests, and is compelled for the purposes of profit to exploit human weaknesses in a certain way, has not only a profound social importance in itself, but is a fact which it is indispensable to take very fully into account in future plans for dealing with the problem.

These are aspects of the matter that should be more fully considered.

## CHAPTER IV

### CAPITALISM, DEMOCRACY AND THE PRESS

WE may take it then that, on the whole, the capitalist interest of most concern to the Press is the Press.

If we are to get a true view of the real rôle of the Press, we should realise that it is itself a vast capitalist interest, which makes its big profits by exploiting the public mind in a certain fashion; and that such a "business," which gives to a few individuals not only great wealth, but power often greater than that of governments, will be motive enough to explain the conduct of those individuals.

We have also seen why the conditions of competition push newspapers towards the development of a certain temper in the public, why there is more money in the falsehoods that the public love than in the unpleasant truth which it would be to their best interest to be told. It is the social and moral results of any form of competition for more profit in newspaper production which are the most fundamental facts of the problem. But certain subsidiary facts of the relationship of the Press to capitalism have also grave importance—particularly when we come to democratic or Socialist alternatives—and should be considered.

There is the relationship of the Press to the advertiser. The modern newspaper is in a financial sense provided for the public by the advertiser. The penny or twopence the reader pays does not defray the actual cost of production—editorial salaries, news gathering, telegrams, printing and white paper, particularly white paper. The reader really pays for his daily paper in a sum added to the cost of his or her "dry goods," tobacco, tea, whiskey, and

patent medicines. Not all of that is dead loss, economically, to the consumer. The knowledge that a new typewriter at ten pounds will do all the work that I want of it as well as the machine for which, but for the advertisement, I should have paid twenty, is worth whatever may have been added to the cost of the cheaper machine; if, indeed, one can properly say that anything has been added, since the cheaper machine has only been rendered possible by large-scale, standardised production, which in its turn has only been made possible by the wide dissemination of its merits. That is the theoretical case for advertising, and it is well to remember that, economically, there is such a case. The indictment of newspaper advertising as we now know it should not include an indictment of all information about the commodities in which the public are interested.

But nothing could well be economically worse than the present system as it actually operates. Under it the amount of space devoted by newspapers to the various commodities which they advertise is not determined in the remotest degree by the relative public utility of those commodities. A soap or whiskey, just like a dozen other soaps or whiskies similarly advertised, gets an amount of space in newspapers which, if devoted to things of real importance, would help materially to transform the public mind. The relative space is determined by one thing: profit. And the profit is determined often by the degree of credulity, inattention, wasteful hypnotism, which advertisements can exploit. Not only are vast sums filched from the public by this means, but it is one of the means by which the Press itself is vitiated and subordinated to the system of profit-making.

Let us note in what respects and to what ends the advertiser is apt to dominate newspaper policy and attitude.

The advertiser is a business man, concerned with the

sale of hairpins or cigarettes, whiskey or soap or pills. To those subjects, we may assume, he gives laborious days, his whole mind. He has been expertly trained to the end of extracting the uttermost profit from them. Politics and social questions, on the other hand, are by him very summarily dismissed with the breakfast coffee, or by snatching at headlines in the Underground. This does not mean that he has no strong opinions about them. Quite the contrary. Our feelings are strongest over the things of which we have the least intellectual grasp, such as religious dogma. Where to the problem of selling hairpins he would, for the most part, bring a disciplined judgment, such lesser subjects as politics and social questions are fields of relaxation where indisciplined prejudices, the desire, say, to "give the Hun what for," can have full play.

And when those feelings rise to a certain height he is quite prepared to tax his business a trifle to satisfy them—incidentally to insist that the papers in which he advertises do not outrage them. The influence of the advertiser, therefore, even where his commercial interests are not directly concerned, merely adds to the current of forces described in the second chapter, causing the Press to swell the volume of unseeing instinct.<sup>1</sup>

But the real importance of advertising influence lies in

<sup>1</sup> The interference of "big finance" in the conduct of the papers is much more direct and conspicuous in America than in England. Financial questions bulk much larger in the public interest of Americans, and most American papers are closely attached to financial groups. Extraordinary cases of influence are sometimes revealed. Mr. Edward Alsworth Ross, in his book, *Changing America*, speaks of a newspaper office where a list of sixteen public corporations was supplied to every member of the staff. The owner of the paper was "interested" in those corporations, and it was forbidden to criticise them or to report anything which might be unfavourable to them. Mr. Ross also mentions the role played by business groups during strikes, in influencing papers against the strikers.

In considering the influence both of "big business" and of governments upon the Press, the operation of the News Agencies is even more

the advertiser's economic relationship to the whole system of profit and private capital. It is outside the scope of these pages to enter into the discussion of Socialism in general. But this much may be taken as common ground in our day: the social machine at present works exceedingly badly. Readjustment of some kind there must be. Even if we reject the Socialist conclusion, we are pushed to changes and modifications, for the wise making of which the public should have all the facts.

Let us take a few specific cases of the last year or two, important than that of the papers themselves. Passing reference has already been made to this. For example, about nine hundred daily newspapers in the United States, including practically all the journals of influence and circulation, receive and print the news dispatches of the Associated Press. This means that, concerning any event of importance, an identical dispatch is printed about fifteen million times and may be read by thirty million people. The Associated Press is officially described as a mutual corporation, owned and controlled by the papers which use its services. But in reality the control rests with the owners or directors of about forty papers, who have held a privileged position since the agency was established. In 1909, the seven hundred newspapers which then used the service had less than one-seventh of the voting control of the organisation. The rest of the votes were cast on bonds which had been sold to certain of the members. Mr. Will Irwin, writing in *Harper's Weekly* some years ago, speaks of the "ring of old, Tory, forty-one vote papers in control" of the Associated Press. It appears that the bonds of the organisation are for twenty-five dollars each, and when the association was formed the big insiders took one thousand dollars' worth each—giving them forty votes, with one additional vote as member.

The international interlocking of the various agencies has already been referred to. For purposes of propaganda these agencies can very readily co-operate to give their news a definite bias. For instance, the collaboration of journalists and agencies in England has recently been secured for the purpose of French political propaganda. Important English papers are supplied with articles that defend the French standpoint by an ex-official of the Quai d'Orsay, sent over to London for this special purpose. In Scandinavia, however, the Press has refused to publish telegrams which can easily be recognised as French propaganda. As regards Poland, France secures a decisive influence on the "Orient" agency. Special commissions, charged with inaugurating a Press propaganda on a large scale, have been sent to the United States. Similar measures have been taken with regard to South America. In Mexico, France has already begun its Press campaign. During a single year, one French agency alone was enabled to spend a sum of six million francs for these purposes.

in which the Press failed notably to supply the facts on which alone the public could decide the issue before it. The question of the retention, for the period of reconstruction, at least, of national control over mines, railways, shipping, and other public services, which had been found indispensable during the War, was one instance. Another was the need of a reformation and reorganisation of our educational system, with the double purpose of making the country more technically efficient (indispensable in view of its economic position as dependent on supplying the world with manufactures and services), and of making the electorate, just swollen by millions of women with no political experience, capable of wise decision. As a third, we may take the relationship of the Western nations to the experiment attempted by the Soviet Government in Russia. We have here three fundamental social issues; two of them questions touching the whole future form of organised society. If public opinion, the decisions of democracy, are to be worth anything at all, if the people are to be capable of self-government, they should have the readiest possible access to all the relevant facts on such decisions as these.

In every one of these fundamental issues the facts have been deliberately and designedly withheld by the Press, as the result in some part (by no means entirely) of a system imposed by the small group of "interests" who are also the chief advertisers.

The Armistice was marked by the outbreak of a series of newspaper "stunts," foremost among which was the clamour for the abolition of "control" over national resources and services. In November, 1918, owing to the exhaustive system of organisation evolved after four years of war, the country was better equipped for production than it was in 1914. The Government might have turned

this power to account in the field of social and industrial reconstruction, have developed and expanded the experiments made during the War, and applied them to the building of houses, the provision of useful goods and efficient public services. Instead of this, all organisation for national production was destroyed at the earliest possible moment. The private controllers of industry immediately demanded the restoration of their privileges, and were for the most part supported enthusiastically by the Press. The "Whitehall limpets" stunt, depicting the officials who had, after all, helped to bring the War to a victorious end—officials appointed, it may be, in response to demands made by the same organs of the Press for a strong hand to stop profiteering and hoarding in vital commodities—as serried ranks of conscientious objectors, clinging to their "dug-outs" and salaries, was foremost among the methods by which the "facts" relating to the issue were presented by the Press. As a result, national factories, shipyards, and ships were sold to private firms, the complicated system of checking contractors' prices and methods, made possible by the national factories, was jettisoned, and even the Ministry of Food had to fight for its life during a period as critical as that of the War. It is not the question of the relative efficiency of public and private control that is the important point: it is the fact that the Press was not willing to have the issue decided on its merits—that it depicted the protagonists on the one side as would-be philanthropists, baulked and thwarted at every turn by the red tape of a perverse Government Department, and those on the other as "limpets," whose one object was to cling to lucrative positions at whatever cost to national efficiency.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a review of some of the facts in this connection, the reader is referred to Sir Leo Chiozza Money's book, *The Triumph of Nationalisation*.

The campaign against the Education Act of 1918 was marked by a similar disregard of real facts, and a stressing of irrelevant catch-words. The word "limpet" having lost its first freshness, "wastrel" was invented, and economy became the order of the day. On the ground of the financial difficulties confronting the nation, all new expenditure, regardless of its object, was denounced, the Education Act was held up as an extravagant proposal for taking money out of the ratepayers' pockets, and was virtually suspended. We heard on every side of an "enormous increase" in expenditure on education. The fact that whereas prices had risen 170 per cent. since 1913, educational expenditure had only risen 86 per cent., was hardly mentioned. The total cost of the additional provisions of the Act has been estimated at less than ten million pounds.<sup>1</sup> This was represented as a monstrous demand on an impoverished nation. The fact that it could practically have been met out of the cost of one battleship was ignored. Instead, the "anti-waste" school entrenched itself behind the prejudices of the middle classes, proclaimed the standard of revolt on behalf of the harassed taxpayer; and when a by-election was fought at Dover on the sole issue of official extravagance, it described the defeat of the Government candidate as a "tug-of-war between the frugal housekeeper and the spendthrift official," in which the housekeeper won.<sup>2</sup> "The Hindenburg Line of Waste" had to be carried, regardless of the sacrifices entailed by the youth of the nation. *The Times*, emphasising the fact that the Dover election was decided by the vote of the women, stated that while women often took no interest in ordinary political controversies, they "understood instinctively" the meaning of the enormous budgets and

<sup>1</sup> Mr. R. H. Tawney in the *Highway* for February, 1921.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 15th January, 1921.

inflated taxation that would react upon their daily expenses. So the Press appealed primarily to this "instinctive understanding," and took care that judgment enlightened by the facts should play no part in the issue.

To a public still inflamed with the violence of war passions, the anti-Russian "stunt" perhaps appealed most strongly, as being capable of the most dramatic representation. Knowledge concerning the greatest experiment ever undertaken in industrial democracy was deliberately withheld, in order that hate against a new enemy might be cultivated. No one knew why, months after the War with Germany had ceased, British soldiers were killing Russian peasants and British ships blockading and starving them. The news throughout the period of intervention was dominated by the hopes and fears of the men who composed the news' organisations. These men, for subjective reasons, apparently, appear to have accepted what was told them by agents and adherents of the old regime and by Government-controlled news services, instead of freely pursuing the facts. The whole truth about the complex situation in Russia would undoubtedly have been difficult to arrive at; but the comparative reliability of news items could have been tested, and an attempt made to sift the truth of the accounts available. It was vitally important that the public should know, for instance, whether the Russian army would fight in the summer of 1917; whether the Soviet Government would make a separate peace with Germany; whether in 1918 the Russian people were really in favour of Allied intervention; whether Koltchak, Denikin and Yudenitch were or were not winning their campaigns; what the real attitude of the Soviet Government was towards peace at the time of the Peace Conference; what were the rights and wrongs of the Polish campaign. Yet on all these questions the news was

coloured by misleading optimism and partisanship, if not by organised propaganda. Catch-phrases like "shaking hands with murder" were considered sufficient to dismiss the question of trade or other relations with the Bolsheviks, so that anyone who favoured the resumption of such relationships acquired a moral taint. The case was presented in such a way that the public sanctioned or became indifferent to policies which involved the fate of millions of innocent people, and the future form of society both in Russia and Europe generally; and this because in a supreme crisis they could not obtain the minimum of necessary information, which it should have been the duty of the Press to supply.

Part, at least, of the motive of these rampers is plain enough: business wanted no restriction in the hunting-grounds for profit; it resented rates and taxes for "educating other people's children"; and capital as a whole was determined to permit no anti-capitalist experiment which might in some degree succeed.

That much of this campaign was childishly short-sighted, even from the point of view of a bourgeois society, need hardly be pointed out. Whatever may be the future of capital in general, the idea that railways and mines can be purely private interests is neither more nor less feasible than the idea that we could make our roads and bridges concerns for levying tolls on the public for private profit. If orderly development is really sought, the bourgeois interest should co-operate in attempting to distinguish between the forms of property most susceptible of public administration and those for which the case for private ownership and management is stronger. Money spent on educating the rising generation of voters should be regarded by those who consider Bolshevism a danger as insurance against social conflagrations. And the history of all

intervention in the revolutionary movements of other countries should have been warning enough of the inevitable outcome of intervention in the affairs of Russia.

Some of the ways in which private interests influence the Press have been indicated. But the most powerful means of all are extremely difficult to state clearly, because they are very subtle and elusive. A democracy which had won not only large political freedoms but some measure of industrial self-government might yet sell itself to the industrial autocracy, be debauched by snobbery, mean standards of social worth, triviality of mind.

The idea that papers of the type of the *Daily Sketch* and *Daily Mirror*, *Home Notes* and *Home Chat* very greatly influence the political outlook of a country might seem far-fetched enough. Yet nothing can be more certain than that they do. We have not yet really awakened to the fact that something approaching half the electorate are women, not yet habituated to political discussion or judgment, or the consideration of political principles. The habit of "personal" judgments is deep-rooted. They learn from the *Sketch* or *Mirror* that the Prince of Wales is a charming boy. Every other girl in England, we are told, sleeps with a photo of the Prince under her pillow. Certain it is that, with the sole exception of Charlie Chaplin, there is no more photographed male in the Empire. He has "captured all hearts." His mother is a model to the motherhood of the world. And some Labour Leader has actually described himself as a Republican! It will cost the Labour Party half a million votes. Already we are discussing the Prince's marriage. He will be progressive and marry an English girl outside the royal circle, a triumph for nationalism and democracy. These are, for millions of readers of the daily picture papers, the life and death issues of politics, the problems of the new social order.

What is happening is that these papers are in fact—without conscious intention, but none the less effectively for that—carrying on a daily propaganda for securing the assent or acquiescence of the multitude in a form of society founded on the principle of inequality. They do not merely habituate these millions to the idea that a special class, a little tiny minority, should occupy a special position of power, of culture, of deference. Once get the mind habituated to the fact that this is the normal and inevitable, if not, indeed, the desirable organisation of human society, and the rest is easy. Perhaps the lottery of life may one day take the avid reader of the society columns into the charmed circle. Have not titles been granted to work-house boys? Has not the wife of a Labour man sometimes become "her Ladyship"? And inevitably there grows up a bias against the idea of equality. The defenders of the old order have already half won the battle.<sup>1</sup>

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The general problem of the relation of the capitalist Press to the formation of opinion is best seen in such a situation as this: in the presence of some of the gravest

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the propaganda is more conscious. The *New York Times* of 26th October, 1919, tells very proudly how certain syndicated organs in America were used to "win the worker from Radicalism." Thus:—

"The woman's page is one of the most carefully thought-out departments, on the theory that the influence of the family is counted on to sway the man from Radicalism. Fully half of this group of publications is sent to the man's home by mail, to give the wife first innings. In this particular magazine the woman's page is fairly crawling with babies . . .

"You hardly notice the propaganda even when you're looking for it with a microscope, but it is there. It is in the weave and the woof, rather than in the conspicuous pattern. You find it in similes, 'like soap in the home of a Bolshevik. Some novelty!' The agitator is taken down from the dignity of his soap-box throne and flippantly advised to bathe." (Quoted by Upton Sinclair in *The Brass Check*.)

crises in the history of civilisation, when salvation depends upon possession by the public of right information, our elaborate and costly machinery of public information, in the shape of the Press, so operates as not only to fail to give us the truth but as to constitute an almost insuperable obstacle to the truth becoming known. Again and again we find ourselves, not as the result of any intention on our part, but as the unforeseen outcome of certain social and industrial forces, in the grip of an elaborate system of organised, if only partly conscious, misrepresentation.

Let us take as a particular illustration of this general problem, the effort made by a group of English experts, administrators, lawyers, officials, bankers, business men, writers, bishops and others, known as the "Fight the Famine Council," to make known, in the days when it might have been possible to render effective material aid, the facts concerning the famine threatening vast areas of the Continent. Unfortunately no one to-day can dispute those facts, but throughout 1919, as we shall see, the public was kept in almost complete ignorance of them, was rendered impervious to them, by the devices of journalistic enterprise which created a smoke-screen of misled emotionalism for that special purpose. In the autumn of 1919 a private conference of experts was called by the Fight the Famine Council, there being invited to it, more especially, British, French, Belgian, Italian and American members of organisations that had been engaged in relief work, or officials attached to the Supreme Economic Council and the various inter-Allied Commissions dealing with economic problems. As in the very terms of the case the hundred millions of Central Europe would constitute perhaps the most difficult phase of the problem, a first-hand statement of that part of it was called for. Two Germans and two Austrians attended the Conference, while among

the British speakers were Sir William Beveridge, of the Supreme Economic Council, Professor Starling, who had examined the conditions in Germany on behalf of the British Government, Mr. Maynard Keynes, who had been adviser to the Treasury throughout the War, Lord Parmoor, leading Co-operators, and so on. No one who heard these men was left in any doubt as to the gravity of the situation. They were dealing with perhaps the biggest and most urgent fact confronting the world at that time; they gave for the first time a definite meaning in terms of human suffering and morals to the phrase "collapse of civilisation." But in listening to them one had at least the consolation that at last the public would be made aware of the facts, and would consequently sanction the necessary measures. The Press, with its telegraphy, and its correspondents in all parts of the world, its illustrations and headlines, would bring home to the public mind a picture of the reality, so that something of the horror of the past might be retrieved by a warm and generous common effort. Problems like the raising of an international loan, the relation of the coal famine in France, to the breakdown of the German transport system, the possibility of restoring economic relations with Russia by means of the Co-operative Societies, would at last be discussed in the Press, and once known by the public the facts would in their very nature produce a response.

Here was an opportunity for the popular Press to perform a real public service. How did it perform it?

A great deal of space was devoted to the Conference by the Press. For some days the most prominent positions in the *Daily Mail* and one or two other papers were given to it. Here are the headlines descriptive of the articles which that paper devoted to the Economic Conference and the problems it was trying to face:—

## THE PRESS AND THE

STOLEN COW HUNS.

MILCH COW GERMANS.

THE COW DELEGATES.

THE COWS THEY STOLE.

WELL-FED GERMAN BABIES.

JUSTICE TO FRENCH BABIES.

What, it will be asked, have "stolen cows" to do with these problems of coal, transport, shipping, raw material, credit, currency, co-operative societies, and the relation of these things to our own industrial restoration? Did this Conference deal with cows? The Conference had not the slightest intention of dealing with cows; in its deliberations from first to last cows were not mentioned, except by one speaker who dealt with newspaper misrepresentation. But for these headlines no reference whatever would have been made to cows. We get this situation then: when the typically successful and popular daily newspaper sets its mind to dealing adequately with a fact like the freezing and starving to death, in Allied and enemy territory alike, of more millions than died in the War, with the accompanying collapse of industry and government, facts all closely related to our own credit and industry, these problems become just one thing: cows stolen by the Hun. That is practically all that the "million a day" newspaper will permit the public to know about them. A problem in statesmanship and economics is transformed into a mean Hun trick to keep cows which belong to the French. An effort which is entirely good and useful becomes in the mind of the public, in some vague and muddled way, associated with the military abominations of the enemy, and of the same moral character.

What we have here, then, is not a mere neglect to provide the public with the facts of a situation, but an

effort to create a state of mind and emotion which shall make the average man impervious to them, a state of mind that shall make it impossible for them to reach his intelligence at all. What is the object of it all? Why this journalistic lynching party? These journalists and newspaper proprietors are not monsters. They are not indifferent to the welfare of their country; presumably they desire to be public-spirited and patriotic. What then is the explanation?

One fact we must remember is that they are conscientious business men in charge of very valuable properties, fighting every day the fierce competitive battle of one paper with another. A paper that is to sell by millions to a population following tiredly day by day dull occupations must be entertaining. Compare, as entertainment for the tired clerk, housewife, 'bus driver, tram conductor, a paper which reports an International Economic Conference (the very title is fatal) in terms of currency and credit problems, coal shortage, and Continental transport, with a paper that converts that dull thing into a thrilling "Hun" plot, creating tangible villains, at home and abroad, upon whom can be vented the emotions stirred and cultivated by the War and of late deprived of their accustomed nourishment. This creation of villains is not fortuitous; it is an indispensable part of the psychology of popular entertainment—as witness the character of the popular drama or film. It has not, in the newspaper, any relation to public service or utility. Sometimes, indeed, journalistic necessity must override a certain squeamishness. During the War an evening paper made the appalling discovery that the Society of Friends was actually providing for the children of interned Germans and Austrians—children often of English women, not only left destitute, but treated as pariahs by neighbours and

friends. One would not have supposed that this act on the part of a sect who interpret the injunctions of their faith with a disconcerting literalness would greatly embarrass the waging of the War or endanger the Western front; nor that to care for homeless and hungry children would dishonour the country or do anything but show that its chivalry was not of the Prussian kind. But the evening paper in question succeeded in making it a "scandal that ought to be stopped." Those guilty of taking starving children into their homes were pilloried as "Hun Coddlers." (Almost as ingenious as "Cow Delegates.") These "villains" were for days held up to public scorn as despicable pacifists and traitors, vilified and abused—to the vast entertainment of a very virtuous public. For the paper which achieved this "stunt" boasts a very great circulation. As one cannot suppose that ennobled proprietors particularly like hounding as "Hun Coddlers" quiet folk, guilty of the crime of taking starving children from the streets, one must assume that it is a necessity of a certain type of modern journalism.

But note the total effect. Our Gresham Law, referred to earlier in these pages, operates. If a paper is not of that kind, it will be beaten by one that is. Finally the sense of what will tickle these particular emotions of the public becomes instinctive on the part of the most successful type of newspaper owner or editor. He will even, by a convenient pragmatism, defend as sound morality the intensive cultivation of this form of journalism. If the great mass like it, how can it be wrong? Is not the voice of the people the voice of God?

Well, we may admit that a fractional part of this emotion by which some papers profit is the voice of God, just as somewhere in the background of the instinct by which the vendor of obscene literature profits there is the life

force of the race. Somewhere hidden in these emotions is a genuine moral indignation, an instinct of group solidarity, of collective responsibility, of retributive justice. But half-blinded, ill-disciplined, those instincts are no safer guide than would be the hunger that makes a typhoid patient crave for food which would certainly destroy him. And if now in truth the nations must "learn or perish," and there has grown up as part of our social organisation a group of powerful interests pushed by the conditions of their professional success to the competitive cultivation of passions which prevent a most elementary learning of the essential facts, then, indeed, we may see here, as elsewhere in our society, the realisation of Butler's fantasy—mankind being destroyed by the very machinery it has created.

## CHAPTER V

### POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS UNDER THE PRESENT SYSTEM

WHATEVER the evils of the existing industrialised Press, the preceding pages will suffice to show that a State Press monopoly would be a still greater evil. That would be a short cut return to a position out of which we have had to struggle as the first condition of freedom; it would re-create an instrument of intellectual tyranny as evil as the Inquisition, and would inevitably undermine both the efficiency of the Government by depriving it of real criticism, and the capacity for self-rule on the part of the mass by the silencing of minority opinion, and so of real discussion and vital intellectual life.

In what direction, then, may we look for solution ?

An attempt will be made to answer that question, not by laying down what would be the ideal solution in a Utopia, but by indicating what is perfectly within the power of the workers now to bring about, without any fundamental reorganisation of society.

But before coming to those positive proposals, it is well to warn the reader against the idea that an improvement upon the present condition, or an alternative to the present system, need be or ought to be a single, exclusive alternative. Even in a Utopia a privately-owned Press might well not only be tolerated but encouraged. It is advisable, parenthetically, to recall why a Press under private ownership (the kind of Press of which, as we have seen, the Trust newspapers deprive us) should be a feature of any vigorous society. By a "Press" here is meant the printed word generally—the book, the pamphlet, the periodical,

the weekly review, the leaflet, handbill, poster, circular. If the right of the individual to use those things as the instrument of individual thought is not preserved we must abandon the principle of freedom of discussion altogether and proscribe political or social heresies as we once proscribed religious heresies. We fall back upon the Index expurgatorius.

We fell back upon it, of course, both in England and America, during the War, and life-long Liberals had no difficulty in deciding that the Sermon on the Mount might very well become seditious political heresy, meet for suppression under the Defence of the Realm Act. In America (and in England, too, in some measure) the same powers have been used in the suppression of Communistic propaganda; in America the repression, particularly in dealing with the I.W.W., has been ferocious. Nor does Communism make any pretence: there is evidently to be no liberty of criticism. Moscow has indicated the course which Communism proclaims its intention of following.

The whole story of "bourgeois" society during the War and of the Communistic revolution since, in this matter of "free discussion," shows once more clearly enough what has been so abundantly displayed throughout all history: that the natural man loathes freedom of discussion; it unsettles his convictions, creates doubts where before there were none, compels difficult intellectual effort, and puts him in the absurd position of pretending to like being told that he is wrong, that his opinions are absurd, and that consequently he is a fool. No man likes being told this. Yet freedom of discussion means no less.

It is because we have not faced intellectual freedom as an extremely unpleasant and unnatural thing, but profess to love it for itself, that it has so far been neither understood nor applied. It is only if we recognise freedom of

discussion for what it is—an extremely unpleasant discipline that offends some of our deepest instincts, but which is indispensable for the formation of an adequate social intelligence—only on that condition can we hope to preserve under Socialism the reality of intellectual freedom. On such a basis we may hope to make of the “liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience,” which, in Milton’s phrase, is “above all liberties,” something of use and value that can be applied in actual political working.

For we know, some of us to our cost, that the principle of “complete freedom of speech and Press” is too vague to be capable of practical application. Papers cannot be free to libel individuals, to be obscene, to publish military secrets, any more than orators could be free to hold up the traffic at the Bank at mid-day by their eloquence. So we have to qualify it. And in those qualifications we find an excuse of getting rid of the freedoms that we detest, and the real justification for which we have never troubled to understand.<sup>1</sup> Instead of proclaiming in the fashion of the American Constitution high and mighty principles, and then paying not the slightest attention to them, because in their entirety they cannot be applied, the architects of the new order will be better employed devising the precise methods by which the maximum of free discussion can be gained with due regard to the need of keeping society’s traffic unimpeded.

This is not the place to review the old attempts to discover a formula by which the limits of permissible suppression of speech or writing can be defined. Perhaps there can be no such formula. (If this is the case, it will

<sup>1</sup> The American Constitution provides that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or of the Press.” But Congress found not the slightest constitutional difficulty in passing the Espionage Act, which is certainly as severe as any Press Act passed in modern times by Prussia. (See note, p. 4.)

only render more imperative the need for watching our coercive tendencies.) But it may be taken as proven that certain constitutional rules of public expression will enlarge rather than restrict the amount of freedom possible.

The present law of libel operates most erratically, yet on the whole it works immeasurably better than does the corresponding law in France or in America. It might be possible to supplement it, however, by a law of "reply," which has been tentatively tried in France. The principle of the law is that a person criticised by a paper has the right of reply to the extent of the original criticism (the reply being entitled to appear in the same position and type). This right might even be extended to Governments.

Quite a number of suggestions have been made to this end. In a useful little book by Messrs. Langdon-Davies and F. H. Hayward,<sup>1</sup> to which the reader may be referred, two are cited. The first, by Mr. G. M. Bennett, is to this effect:—

"A 'Truthful Press Act' would proclaim any violation of the truth, whether direct or indirect, to be a punishable offence. Anyone who considered that the truth had been violated would notify the offending newspaper, and also a special Press Bureau. If the newspaper acknowledge the violation of the truth (whether accidental or intentional) it would within a reasonable number of days publish a correction, under a statutory heading in half-inch type. If it denied any offence against the truth, the case would go to court and, after hearing all the evidence, an ordinary jury would decide whether or not there had been mis-representation or falsehood. Penalties might run as follows:—

1st conviction—fine of one-tenth capital value.

<sup>1</sup> *Democracy and the Press* (National Labour Press).

2nd conviction—fine of two-tenths capital value.

3rd conviction—fine of three-tenths capital value and suppression for one month, and so on.

Further, every newspaper would be compelled to print conspicuously the names of owners or controlling shareholders, and also the names of all other journals or periodicals owned or controlled by the same people.

Frivolous abuse of the Act would have to be guarded against, but the knowledge that falsehood or misrepresentation was punishable would do much to check unscrupulous and irresponsible journalism.” (p. 43.)

The second is from Sir Charles Walston:—

“The Press Laws ought to be modified not only to include direct punishment for the spreading by the newspapers of untrue statements of whatever nature, but also to provide for the adequate and immediate correction of such statements. The newspapers ought to be bound, with the least possible delay, to publish apologies and retractions upon being notified of misstatements. The apologies and retractions ought to be published at once, so as to make them as effective as possible, and any delay ought to constitute an aggravation of the offence should further legal proceedings follow.” (p. 44.)

In any case, the use which the Government made of the Press for recruiting and the advertising of its loans may have to be repeated by a Labour Government in its attempt to secure a fair statement of its case when fighting, as it will be fighting, a hostile capitalist Press.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It may be recalled that the Northcliffe Press refused at one period to publish the Government recruiting advertisements, because, in the opinion of Lord Northcliffe, the Government should already have imposed conscription. A Labour Ministry might find a hostile Press refusing Labour publicity, unless due legal provision had been made beforehand.

The "Truthful Press Act" would, of course, have to face difficulties like the following:—Imagine a "stunt paper" engaged on a campaign against State Railways; it would print every day a list of all trains that were late; every accident would be "splashed"; every day there would be letters from readers relating incivility on the part of porters or incompetence on the part of officials. This could be kept up for weeks without a single mis-statement being made. How could the law prosecute a paper for relating the simple facts of daily occurrence? The one-sidedness of the thing would, of course, constitute a falsehood in its total effect. The things recounted might well be precisely what had happened before nationalisation had taken place; the effect on the mind of the public would be to carry the conviction that they were peculiar to nationalisation. Yet it is difficult to see what a law could do about it.

Further suggestions bear upon the suppression of editorial anonymity, and would exact that the names of owners, managers and editors appear on papers, and that their leading articles bear the names of the authors. There may be some slight value in these suggestions, but not much reliance can be placed upon somewhat mechanical devices of this kind.

We come to the possibilities of a States Press, organs run by the Government, not as a monopoly or an exclusive substitute for privately-owned papers but as a supplement thereto.

Just as, for the reasons we have dealt with, the ideal solution cannot reject a free, privately-owned Press, for the production of books, pamphlets, circulars, periodicals, placards, and so forth, although private capital in newspapers has attendant upon it many of the evils analysed in the preceding pages, so neither can we reject a "State

Press" as part of the solution, although a State *monopoly* in publication would inevitably be the beginning and foundation of a new tyranny more deadly than any theological tyranny of the past. If, for the preservation of sound judgment by the majority, we need to give the minority means for stating its case, that object also demands that the majority, the Government, shall have the same facility. A competently managed "Official Journal" is by no means to be rejected as one of the elements of sound public judgment. But such a suggestion is only worth consideration if the more fundamental proposal here discussed can be made practicable. That fundamental proposal is that there should be a radical change in the status of journalism as a profession, and that it should be given a standing similar to that of the profession of law or of medicine: a calling the practise of which demands a certain minimum of legal qualification. Having secured that much, the management of the State Press should not be placed under a Government Department responsible to members of the Government, but entrusted to a body occupying much the same position that is now held by a court of law—*independent*, that is, of the Government; telling the truth as it sees it, guided by principles which are recognised as the foundations of the Guild or profession from which the members of the journalistic "judiciary" would be drawn.

Let us consider first what is meant by giving to the profession of journalism the status that we now give to law and medicine.

The problem has been stated by Mr. Walter Lippmann as follows:—

"The taking of testimony in a trial is hedged about with a thousand precautions derived from long experience of the fallibility of the witness and the prejudices of the jury. We call this, and rightly, a

fundamental phase of human liberty. But in public affairs the stake is infinitely greater. It involves the lives of millions, and the fortune of everybody. The jury is the whole community, not even the qualified voters alone. The jury is everybody who creates public sentiment—chattering gossips, unscrupulous liars, congenital liars, feeble-minded people, prostitute minds, corrupting agents. To this jury any testimony is submitted, in any form, by any anonymous persons, with no test of reliability, no test of credibility, and no penalty for perjury. If I lie in a lawsuit involving the fate of my neighbour's cow, I can go to jail. But if I lie to a million readers in a matter involving war and peace, I can lie my head off, and, if I choose the right series of lies, be entirely irresponsible. Nobody will punish me if I lie about Japan, for example. I can announce that every Japanese valet is a reservist, and every Japanese art store a mobilisation centre. I am immune. And if there should be hostilities with Japan, the more I lied the more popular I should be. If I asserted that the Japanese secretly drank the blood of children, that Japanese women were unchaste, that the Japanese were really not a branch of the human race after all, I guarantee that most of the newspapers would print it eagerly, and that I could get a hearing in churches all over the country. And all this for the simple reason that the public, when it is dependent on testimony and protected by no rules of evidence, can act only on the excitement of its pugnacities and its hopes.

“The mechanism of the news-supply has developed without plan, and there is no one point in it at which one can fix the responsibility for truth. The fact is that the subdivision of labour is now accompanied by the subdivision of the news-organisation. At one end

of it is the eye-witness, at the other the reader. Between the two is a vast, expensive transmitting and editing apparatus. This machine works marvellously well at times, particularly in the rapidity with which it can report the score of a game or a transatlantic flight, or the death of a monarch, or the result of an election. But where the issue is complex, as for example, in the matter of the success of a policy, or the social conditions among a foreign people,—that is to say, where the real answer is neither yes nor no, but subtle and a matter of balanced evidence—the subdivision of the labour involved in the report causes no end of derangement, misunderstanding, and even misrepresentation.”<sup>1</sup>

The suggestion is, indeed, his, that until journalism can evolve a professional standard at least as high as that of law and medicine, the Press can only be regarded as a social excrescence.

Journalism, then, must become a profession demanding a certain minimum of intellectual equipment, which must include some knowledge of “what is evidence.” Mr. Lippmann, dealing with this side of the subject, points out that

“With this increase in prestige must go a professional training in journalism in which the ideal of objective testimony is cardinal. The cynicism of the trade needs to be abandoned, for the true patterns of the journalistic apprentice are not the slick persons who scoop the news, but the patient and fearless men of science who have laboured to see what the world really is. . . . Just because news is complex and slippery, good reporting requires the exercise of the highest of the scientific virtues. They are the habits of ascribing no more credibility to a statement than it warrants, a

<sup>1</sup> From an article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1919.

nice sense of the probabilities, and a keen understanding of the quantitative importance of particular facts. You can judge the general reliability of any observer most easily by the estimate he puts upon the reliability of his own report. If you have no facts of your own with which to check him, the best rough measurement is to wait and see whether he is aware of any limitations in himself; whether he knows that he saw only part of the event that he describes and whether he has any background of knowledge against which he can set what he thinks he has seen.

"This kind of sophistication is, of course, necessary for the merest pretence to any education. But for different professions it needs to be specialised in particular ways. A sound legal training is pervaded by it, but the scepticism is pointed to the type of case with which the lawyer deals. The reporter's work is not carried on under the same conditions, and therefore requires a different specialisation. How he is to acquire it is, of course, a pedagogical problem requiring an inductive study of the types of witness and the source of information with whom the report is in contact.

"Some time in the future, when men have thoroughly grasped the rôle of public opinion in society, scholars will not hesitate to write treatises on evidence for the use of news-gathering services. No such treatise exists to-day, because political science has suffered from that curious prejudice of the scholar which consists in regarding an irrational phenomenon as not quite worthy of serious study."<sup>1</sup>

But there must also be a code. If, indeed, there were a professional code to which reputable journalists felt under an obligation of honour to subscribe, certain things which

<sup>1</sup> From the *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1919.

now happen as a matter of course could not happen at all. Did a journalist take his task of giving his testimony of what really took place in the affair that he is recording as seriously as the witness gives his testimony in a court of law, if in pronouncing his judgment he did it as seriously as a judge pronounces sentence upon a criminal—and a journalist's sentence, of course, has immeasurably greater social importance than a judge's—the kind of thing detailed earlier in these pages as typical of our latter-day Press should become well-nigh impossible.

If we had this preliminary condition, we might then hope that a State newspaper would be managed as we manage a court of law, by a journalistic judiciary, pledged to tell the truth with the same scrupulousness that a judge is pledged to administer the law and hold the scales of justice even. A State Press whose administration was a matter of high and solemn public office, involving professional honour and pride, might be an instrument for giving us the facts. The administration of the courts would seem to give ground for hope that the thing is not impossible. We take a man from one of the political parties and make a judge of him. He may have to sit in judgment over political enemies. But we know that the danger of gross partiality is very small. There are prescribed laws of evidence that must be observed; laws founded, by the way, upon the twin principles of the extreme fallibility of human testimony and the need of contradictory statement of a given case. There is a high professional code to be followed, a professional pride to be maintained. Given a position of complete economic independence and security, there is no reason why these motives should not operate to the full. In practice, in the courts of law they do operate, for the most part. Only, perhaps, where patriotism in war-time is involved would an English judge flout evidence

and plain fact and glory in it.<sup>1</sup> If it is possible to get the generally high plane of scrupulousness that obtains in the administration of a law which is in itself often outrageously silly, cruel and unjust, it should surely be possible to develop a journalistic judiciary pledged to tell in the country the truth, to communicating *all* the relevant facts upon which its daily discussions, the development of the national mind, and the well-working of society, depend.

It would be a foolish pessimism to say that there is no foundation in our moral and intellectual traditions for such a social institution. In law and in science we have traditions which, applied to the problem of Public Information, might enable us to get at the truth in public affairs. A journalistic "judgeship," carrying responsibility for the impartiality and truth of the news published in an official newspaper, would rapidly become a position of high honour, invested with all the traditions of respect that have gathered round our other judicial appointments.

Particularly might the method of a Public Press, in the sense of a publicly controlled Press, be a real means of information, if our attitude towards free discussion were founded not upon a sham liking for it, but upon some vivid realisation of its social necessity; if we looked upon it as we look, for instance, upon Law. Nobody "loves" the Law, but we recognise that we must have it; that it is a prime social necessity; that anyone who defies it and sets himself against it is selfishly allowing his instinct to get

<sup>1</sup> When Mr. E. D. Morel was described by a weekly paper as a "paid agent of Prussia," and contemplated an action, the overwhelming weight of professional advice was to the effect that he could not possibly expect a verdict, or at best he could only hope for a "farthing damages" one. Yet, if he was a Prussian spy, it was the obvious duty of the Government to arrest and shoot him. When he was arrested and sentenced to six months imprisonment it was for sending one of his pamphlets to M. Romain Rolland in Switzerland!

the upper hand; and that we must all uphold it however hateful its detestable regulations may be.

I have attempted to indicate here two main proposals by which a Government might improve the condition of things to which we have been brought by our present industrialised Press. The first is, that whatever there is of good in the "Guild idea," as we see it operating in the professions of law and medicine, should be applied to the profession of journalism. Having secured that, a Socialist State might safely embark upon the experiment of a State Press (which should not, however, be a monopoly), under the control not of the Government, but of a body occupying very much the relationship that the judiciary now occupies to the Executive—a collateral authority, pledged to certain principles and standards.

The membership of such a journalistic judiciary would be regarded as the greatest prize of the journalistic profession. While carrying responsibility, appointment to such a body would carry honour, high payment, pensions. The members would be journalists who by their character had won the right to "sum up" the facts of current history for the jury of public opinion. To pronounce judgments on the facts of public events without fear or favour would, in such circumstances, be no more impossible than it is for judges in a court of law to maintain their impartiality between the parties who appear before them. Grossly to distort the facts would, let us hope, earn a contempt as ferocious as that which we should visit upon a judge who sold his judgments to the highest bidder.

### *The Future*

What then are the possibilities of the future? What steps would be taken by a State, recognising the problem

of the Press as outlined here. Something, I suggest, along these lines:—

- (1) While permitting and even encouraging freedom of the Press, which must necessarily mean the production of papers, books, periodicals, circulars, etc., by private persons, it would so amend the law with reference to anonymity, libel and so forth, as to avoid some at least of the abuses now associated with a privately-owned Press.
- (2) Make of journalism a chartered profession, like that of law and medicine, demanding a minimum standing of qualifications and adherence to a certain code of professional conduct.
- (3) Create a State or Governmental Press, managed, however, not by the Government, but by a "journalistic judiciary," pledged to the impartial presentation of the news. Such a judiciary should be independent of the Cabinet, and owe its powers to Royal Charter: should constitute a "public concern."

Suggestion 3 has been much criticised. But is it not, after all, the principle, or the method which we have applied to Broadcasting, which has provided a mass of useful experience since the first edition of this book was published?

The B.B.C., as a "public concern," with all its shortcomings, constitutes a better means of public information than that provided by the competitive industrialised press.

When the late Lord Northcliffe bought *The Times*, and he was very full of his new acquisition and what he would make of it as a national asset, the present writer put, in conversation, this question to him: "What will happen when you die?" To this Lord Northcliffe replied that

it was his intention to place the paper under a public committee, something like that which manages the British Museum. This idea was never carried out. If it had been it would have afforded an experiment somewhat along the lines of what has been suggested in clause 3. Since Lord Northcliffe's death both *The Times* and *The Spectator*, to mention only two cases, have embodied, I believe, in their Articles of Association, provisions for preserving the public character of these properties; while the agreement under which *The Herald* was transferred to Messrs. Odhams contains a clause by which general policy shall be under the control of the Trade Unions. One may see in all these cases the beginnings of a process by which a newspaper starting as a purely private enterprise develops into a public concern, just as banks have developed from private enterprises into public concerns; concerns, not necessarily run by Governments, but in which the public interest, by one device or another, is able to make itself felt.

The public interest here is that the truth about public affairs should be told as impartially and clearly as possible. The first step to ensuring that is to create an awareness of vital need for it. That awareness would set up the will to achieve the necessary end. Where the will existed, a way would be found.



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